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Strengthening national capacity in statistics

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report was prepared at the request of the Statistical Commission at its thirty-seventh session to report on the implementation of Economic and Social Council resolution 2006/6, on strengthening statistical capacity.[a] It provides an overview of the work undertaken by the United Nations Statistics Division, international agencies and the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Millennium Development Goals Indicators in 2006 to support national efforts in building and strengthening national statistical capacity. The report is submitted to the Commission for discussion. The Commission may wish to comment on the future steps as described in paragraph 33 of the report.

[a] *Official Records of the Economic and Social Council, 2006, Supplement No. 4* (E/2006/24), chap. I, sect. B.

* E/CN.3/2007/1.

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I. Introduction

1. Over the years, the Economic and Social Council and the Statistical Commission have placed great importance on technical cooperation to strengthen statistical capacity in countries. The Statistical Commission has emphasized that technical cooperation activities should be demand-driven, responsive to local conditions, nationally controlled and better coordinated.

2. At its thirty-seventh session, the Statistical Commission took note of the relevant recommendations of the Friends of the Chair on Millennium Development Goals indicators[1] and stressed the importance of addressing those issues in the context of strengthening the statistical capacity of Member States, in particular of the developing countries, to monitor the Millennium Development Goals. In its resolution 2006/6 on strengthening statistical capacity, the Economic and Social Council requested the United Nations Statistics Division, the regional commissions and the international agencies to support national efforts in building and strengthening national statistical capacity. The resolution also called on the United Nations Statistics Division, in its capacity as coordinator of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Millennium Development Goals Indicators, to improve countries' reporting on Millennium Development Goals indicators and to coordinate capacity-building activities where needed.

3. The present report describes recent development and initiatives by international and national partners in building statistical capacity and actions taken by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Millennium Development Goals Indicators and the United Nations Statistics Division to address the main points raised by the Commission and the requests contained in the resolution, as reported above. In particular, it provides an overview of conclusions reached by the Expert Group to implement the recommendations contained in Council resolution 2006/6. The report also proposes the critical steps required to meet the data gaps by 2015.

II. Better data for monitoring the Millennium Development Goals

4. The availability of good statistics and the capacity of governments, donors and international organizations to systematically measure, monitor and report on progress in all policy areas lies at the heart of development policy and the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. Scaling up of national statistical services has been increasingly recognized as a necessary step to produce data for monitoring measurable development outcomes. The essence of managing for results is that good policies, based on empirical evidence and a clear understanding of the development process, lead to improved outcomes consistent with national priorities and objectives.

5. Since the periodic assessment of progress towards the Millennium Development Goals began over five years ago, a number of initiatives have been launched to address the needs of developing countries to strengthen their statistical capacity to produce, analyse and disseminate data. These activities, especially the increased dialogue between countries and international agencies, have improved the

[1] See E/CN.3/2006/15.

availability of data for the monitoring of Millennium Development Goals progress (see the table below). Still, serious gaps remain in the availability and quality of data needed for effective monitoring of progress. With only a few years left to the target year of 2015, international and national financial commitments remain inadequate to support countries in their efforts to build strong statistical systems.

Table
Distribution of countries by number of indicators on which trend analysis is possible

Number of indicators with at least two data points	*2005 assessment*		*2006 assessment*	
	Number of countries	*Percentage of countries*	*Number of countries*	*Percentage of countries*
1-10	4	2	0	0
11-20	36	19	17	9
21-30	93	48	92	48
More than 30	58	30	82	43
Total countries	**191**	**100**	**191**	**100**

Note: The table has been produced on the basis of data available as of November 2006 in the Millennium Development Goals indicators database maintained by the United Nations Statistics Division at: http://mdgs.un.org. The analysis focuses only on "official" Millennium Development Goals indicators.

6. The assessment of data availability in the Millennium Development Goals indicators database shows that as of November 2006, 17 countries have data for 20 indicators or less. While the improvement in reporting mechanisms from countries to the international statistical system has reduced the number of countries from 36 to 17, there still exist significant gaps and shortcomings in the data production at the country level.[2]

7. Data gaps exist in all statistical areas and on indicators derived from different data collection programmes. For instance, only 57 countries in the developing regions have at least two data points for the indicator on poverty, as measured by the percentage of population living below $1 (PPP) per day consumption, and only four countries have two data points to assess progress in the percentage of children under five treated with anti-malaria drugs. The youth unemployment rate is available for two points in time only in 58 countries.[3]

III. Key findings of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group

8. The Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Millennium Development Goals Indicators, responsible for the preparation of data and analysis to monitor global trends in Millennium Development Goals and coordinated by the United Nations Statistics Division, has made statistical capacity one of its priority areas of work and

[2] See E/CN.3/2007/13 for a more detailed report on the assessment of data availability on Millennium Development Goals indicators.
[3] E/CN.3/2007/13.

has been working to define priorities and provide recommendations for actions to be undertaken at both the national and the international levels. International agencies, donors and representatives from national statistical offices have worked together to identify national priorities in capacity-building and to make specific recommendations for the improvement of the delivery and coordination of statistical assistance to countries.

9. At the most recent meeting of the Expert Group in November 2006, over 60 representatives from national statistical offices, country line ministries, agencies' country offices and international agencies reviewed priorities and formulated recommendations to improve the availability of data to monitor the Millennium Development Goals. They agreed that shortcomings in the availability and quality of data to monitor the Millennium Development Goals were due to the following:

- Countries often lack the capacity to apply internationally agreed definitions;
- Data on every given indicator are often available from different sources without validation from the national statistical authority;
- There is a general lack of coordination within national statistical systems and no clearly defined authority to oversee and verify data originating from the different data providers;
- In many developing countries, existing data collection programmes are not sustainable and national statistical offices are too dependent on survey data from surveys driven by donors, with little national ownership;
- Countries lack a focal point responsible for centralizing all requests from international agencies and reporting to the international statistical system.

10. Participants of the Expert Group, including representatives from both countries and international agencies, further agreed on steps that need to be undertaken to improve countries' capacity to report on Millennium Development Goals indicators. They stressed the need to improve coordination within countries' national statistical system, bringing all data producers together through an efficient coordination mechanism. They also agreed that that in turn would facilitate the interaction with the international statistical system and bring closer together the national and the global monitoring systems (see the annex to the present report).

11. National statisticians also recommended increasing the sense of national ownership of the internationally driven and sponsored surveys. The statistical community is well aware of this concern, and the various partners are working together towards a better coordinated way of delivering technical and financial assistance and more sustainable data collection programmes. International agencies are increasing their efforts to better coordinate their initiatives and to integrate their programmes and initiatives into the existing national strategies for the development of statistics.

IV. Progress in building statistical capacity in countries

12. The framework for international partners to assist countries in strengthening their statistical systems to better respond to new demands for official statistics has been provided by the Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics (MAPS). The Plan, consisting of a coordinated series of six actions, was developed in 2004 to improve

statistics to meet the measurement challenge of the international development agenda by 2010. Three of the actions are aimed at improving statistical work at the national level:

(a) Mainstream strategic planning of statistical systems in national development processes;

(b) Ensure full participation in the 2010 round of population censuses;

(c) Increase financing for statistics and statistical capacity-building by countries and partners.

13. The other three actions address the need to improve coordination and strengthen the international statistical system in support of a sustained improvement in the statistical capacity of developing countries:

(a) Set up an international household survey network to improve the effectiveness of international household survey programmes;

(b) Make improvements in data needed for Millennium Development Goals monitoring;

(c) Improve the accountability for international statistics.

14. Many developing countries, assisted by development partners, especially by the Partnership in Statistics for Development in the Twenty-first Century (Paris 21), have developed national strategies for the development of statistics (NSDS). NSDS provide countries with a strategy for improving statistical capacity across the entire statistical system and have increasingly provided the framework for donors to contribute to countries' statistical development in a coherent manner and in accordance with specific national priorities.

15. Progress has also been made towards one of the main objectives of the Marrakech Action Plan for Statistics, ensuring full participation to the 2010 World Population Census Programme. The United Nations Statistics Division, with financial contribution by the World Bank and in collaboration with key partners such as the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations regional commissions, has provided technical assistance to countries, expertise and improved and revised international standards.

16. Considerable progress has been achieved in improving the effectiveness of existing internationally sponsored data collection programmes. The establishment of the International Household Survey Network, in late 2004, aiming at better coordination and timing of internationally supported surveys, in order to maximize their effectiveness in providing comparable data, has been an important step in that direction. An inventory of survey instruments and datasets is being established.

17. Developing statistical capacity programmes, especially when that requires substantive institutional changes, and obtaining the necessary data from them, takes time. With only a few years left before the international community will have to assess whether their commitments made to the Millennium Development Goals have produced the expected results, there is a need for producing the necessary data in the short term. A pilot programme for accelerating data improvements has been launched by the Paris 21 secretariat, supported by the MAPS Development Grant Facility. The "Accelerated Data Programme" (ADP), designed to implement action 5 of MAPS — improving the measurement of the Millennium Development Goals in

the milestone years of 2010 and 2015 — is focused on household surveys and censuses. Work is already under way in several pilot countries.

18. Another important initiative focuses on enhancing the data dissemination infrastructure of national statistics systems in an effort to improve the use of data for evidence-based policy design and evaluation among users of official statistics, especially on Millennium Development Goals indicators. The Division collaborates with the DevInfo group to support Member States in the use of common database systems and platforms for tracking national human development indicators. MDGInfo, an adaptation of DevInfo, a technology specifically designed to support governments in Millennium Development Goals monitoring, has been issued for two consecutive years, in 2005 and 2006.

19. Other initiatives have been launched to improve country capacity to produce statistics for the Millennium Development Goals based on closer inter-agency partnership and collaboration. One such initiative is represented by the Health Metrics Network, a partnership comprised of countries, international agencies, donors, global health initiatives and experts, aimed at improving the availability and use of health information.

V. Progress in coordination of international efforts

20. Improving the effectiveness of capacity-building initiatives and the accountability of the international statistical system demands that international partners develop ways to harmonize their efforts and establish standards for good practices, in full respect of the specific requirements of the countries with which they work, especially taking into account the goals and priorities as set out in countries' NSDS. A good step in that direction was the agreement by international statistical agencies on a set of principles defining good practices by international statistical agencies.[3]

21. Some steps have also been taken towards a better coordination of statistical capacity-building efforts by agencies and donors. Paris 21 has undertaken a review of existing statistical capacity activities in sub-Saharan Africa, collecting information from 56 development partners on ongoing projects and programmes over the years 2004-2005. Also, the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities, at its last session in September 2006, established four task teams to produce specific recommendations on ways to improve coordination of statistical capacity-building efforts, including on: how to improve reporting and exchange of information on statistical capacity-building activities; capacity-building through regional training initiatives for national statisticians; modalities for coordination of technical cooperation programmes at the subregional level; and the assessment of the effectiveness of statistical capacity-building activities in African countries.[4] The Committee will review the recommendations at its tenth session in September 2007 and take the work forward.

22. As better coordination of development activities among international partners is increasingly recognized as crucial to ensure the effective delivery of technical assistance, the Statistics Division has increased its efforts to facilitate donor

[4] See E/CN.3/2007/24 for a more detailed description of the work of the Committee for the Coordination of Statistical Activities.

coordination. The Division has recently explored new formats for coordinating work and establishing cooperation with other partners. One example is the recently launched project in the Southern African region, where the steering committee responsible for setting the structure and monitoring the implementation of the project also includes, besides national chief statisticians, international agencies and donors. This will allow the various stakeholders to benefit from each other's ongoing activities, avoiding duplications and helping countries to integrate the various components of the project into their overall national statistical development strategies.

23. The United Nations Statistics Division has also focused on improving south-south collaboration and building networks of statisticians in regions and subregions. This has been the approach adopted in the regional and subregional projects conducted by the Division, all relying on existing regional and subregional organizations and networks, in an effort to create strong communities of statisticians who can draw on each other's strengths and achievements. There are currently two projects being conducted in the regions of the Economic Community of West African States and the Southern African Development Community, both aiming at strengthening statistical capacity-building in support to the Millennium Development Goals. New similar projects, also aimed at the improvement of data for monitoring the Millennium Development Goals and structured around subregional organizations, are in the pipeline.

24. In a note by the United Nations Statistics Division to the High-Level Committee on Programmes, on coordinating mechanisms within the global statistical system, the issue was raised of improving existing arrangements in order to achieve a higher level of coordination among international partners. Effective coordination will be needed at all stages, including programme design, project evaluation, and quality control and monitoring. The High-Level Committee was requested to invite the United Nations Development Group and all concerned United Nations agencies and entities to extend support to this effort. The Committee expressed appreciation for the initiatives and efforts under way and stressed the need to make further progress in the coordination of the global statistical system and the crucial importance of a concerted effort at statistical capacity-building.[5]

VI. Strategies in building statistical capacity to monitor the Millennium Development Goals

25. As we approach the target year of 2015 for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals, there is an increased sense of urgency among the development community. Data collection programmes take sometimes years to materialize and, once they are in place, data become available to users only after another year or two, in the best cases.

26. In the short term, international statistical agencies and donors will need to concentrate on identifying the key data gaps, focusing on the indicators that are most widely used in planning and monitoring, and implement data collection programmes, mainly using survey tools. The timely implementation of such programmes is crucial, as the next few years represent the last opportunity to

[5] See CEB/2006/7.

produce the necessary data for countries to be able to measure their achievements with regard to the Millennium Development Goals. The next few years also represent a unique opportunity for national statistical systems to build on the ongoing census-taking operations.

27. Also, in the short term, national statistical systems will need to strengthen their capacity to disseminate data, while at the same time improve access to data and build statistical skills within a large number of users across government and civil society. The development of data dissemination infrastructures, which will include an information technology plan, data analysis and dissemination tools consistent with international standards and guidelines, and improved software and hardware, will be crucial to ensure that existing data are used effectively in planning and monitoring and are made available to users nationally and internationally.

28. The 2010 World Population Census Programme provides a unique opportunity to engage development partners in providing assistance to countries to produce important benchmark data for monitoring development results. The census provides an opportunity for the country to strengthen its statistical infrastructures. It is therefore important that international partners build around the core programme of the census to promote and develop data collection and dissemination in other statistical areas.

29. In the longer term, the international community will continue to work towards improved coordination of initiatives by various partners to increase effectiveness of existing programmes, avoid duplications and ensure full consistency with NSDS.

30. It will also be important to bring together statistical sectors in a unified and coordinated statistical system (for instance, integrating health, education, employment records with survey data; strengthening the use of civil registration to improve the availability of vital statistics); improve coordination within the national statistical system, with one agency (preferably the national statistical office) mandated to validate all official statistics and ensure the release and dissemination of the necessary data to all users, including the international statistical system; and continue to advocate with national Governments and donors to increase financial resources for statistical capacity-building.

VII. Conclusions and way forward

31. **The United Nations Statistics Division will continue to encourage strong inter-agency collaboration to make existing initiatives more effective and increase agency-country consultations. This will facilitate a process in which national priorities are regularly reviewed and discussed, data gaps and quality issues in the monitoring of the Millennium Development Goals are continuously assessed, and the necessary steps to further the work are identified.**

32. **The Division will also continue to shape its statistical capacity-building programme on the basis of national demands and priorities, in continuous collaboration with partner agencies.**

33. **The Commission may wish to comment on the proposed future steps as outlined below:**

(a) To fully engage the countries, through regular participation in the Inter-Agency and Expert Group, in the assessment of data availability and the identification of priorities for action;

(b) To promote and coordinate the development of data collection programmes to be carried out within the next five years;

(c) To promote the use of upgraded data dissemination infrastructures and common platforms for data and metadata exchange and assist countries in this area;

(d) To continue promoting demand-driven and regionally and subregionally-based capacity-building initiatives;

(e) To promote and contribute to the development of stronger coordination within national statistical systems so that diverging national estimates can be validated and disseminated as official statistics by the national statistical office.

Annex

Summary of recommendations on countries' needs in building capacity for the production and analysis of Millennium Development Goal and development indicators

Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Millennium Development Goal Indicators

10th meeting, Geneva, 15-16 November 2006

The main conclusions of the discussion on gaps and problems on data to monitor the Millennium Development Goals were as follows:

1. Data on Millennium Development Goal indicators are often obtained from different sources and according to different definitions and methodologies, which creates difficulties in selecting and reconciling data into one official indicator.

2. Countries often lack the capacity to apply internationally agreed and recommended definitions and to understand the discrepancies in national data, due to incorrect definitions.

3. In some countries, the national statistical office has no authority to verify the data from other national producers and to coordinate the use of the various different sources.

4. Although in some countries coordination among different data producers is already mandated by national statistical laws, these laws are not always enforced owing to lack of organization within the statistical system and pressure from donors who accommodate their requests and agendas before country needs. There is a diversion of resources from national to international priorities.

5. Many developing countries lack sustainability in data collection programmes. National statistical offices are too dependent on survey data, and particularly from surveys driven by donors, with little national ownership.

6. Administrative data are not used effectively, and additional efforts are needed to improve the quality of records and data generated by administrative systems.

7. Problems with reporting to international agencies are linked to the lack of coordination within countries among the various statistical agencies (administrative data from line ministries, national statistical offices, etc.) and the lack of a focal point at the country level for centralizing all requests received from international agencies.

Strategies and best practices were recommended as follows:

1. Strengthening the coordinating role of the national statistical office within the national statistical system. National statistical offices should be the central office for all statistical matters in order to ensure quality of official statistics, use of agreed standards across all national data producers, and consistency and continuity in official data series.

2. Establishing a "quality system" to assess all available statistics in the country for the different topics, with the national statistical office as a "clearance agency" verifying the quality and production of all official statistics for the country. The

secondment/deployment of national statistical office staff to line ministries producing statistics was indicated as a possible way to ensure statistical quality to the outputs and to facilitate coordination across data producers within the national statistical system.

3. Improving access to metadata for countries to be able to produce data according to agreed definitions and methods.

4. Establishing an inter-agency, inter-department body/committee in charge of the Millennium Development Goals (monitoring, policymaking) involving all stakeholders. This would ensure institutionalization of Millennium Development Goals monitoring and establish a collaborative environment inside the country. It would also facilitate the production of single (as opposed to multiple) statistics to be used as official statistics within the country and to be sent to the international agencies.

5. Establishing an improved national information system and developing an official central (single) repository/database maintained by national statistical offices or Millennium Development Goals committees to provide official data to national and international partners and thus facilitate communication within the country and between the country and the international community.